

The Undead Hypothesis: Why the Documentary Hypothesis is the *Frankenstein* of Biblical Studies

Duane Garrett

Duane Garrett is a professor of Old Testament at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. He has served the International Mission Board by teaching in Southern Baptist seminaries in both Korea and Canada. Dr. Garrett is the author of many articles and books, including two Old Testament commentaries in the New American Commentary series. He is currently working on a commentary on the Song of Solomon for the Word Biblical Commentary series.

A stock feature of the classic “grade B” horror movie is the undead creature who relentlessly stalks innocent people and terrorizes an otherwise quiet village. Whether it be *Frankenstein*, the Mummy, *Dracula*, or simply crude, grotesque zombies with rotting flesh falling off their limbs and faces, these villains share a common trait. They all have already died and usually have already been buried. But then, either through the blunder of some investigator or the work of some evil genius, they rise and walk again. The dilemma posed by these undead monsters is obvious: How do you kill someone who is already dead?

A similar creature stalks the halls of biblical studies. It is routinely raised up from the grave in classrooms and it haunts textbooks and monographs that deal with the Hebrew Scriptures. Wherever it roams, it distorts the analysis of the text of the Bible, confounds readers, and produces strange and irrational interpretations. This undead creature sometimes goes by the quasi-mystical sounding sobriquet “the JEDP theory,” but it is better known by its formal name, the documentary hypothesis.

The time has come for scholars to recognize that the documentary hypothesis is dead. The arguments that support it have been dismantled by scholars of many stripes—many of whom have no theological commitment to the Bible. The theory is, however, still taught as an

established result of biblical scholarship in universities and theological schools around the world. Books and monographs rooted in it still frequently appear. Laughably, some of these books are touted for their “startling new interpretations” of the history of the Bible while in fact doing little more than repackaging old ideas.¹ If the sheer volume of literature on a hypothesis were a demonstration of its veracity, the documentary hypothesis would indeed be well established.² Nevertheless, while the dead hand of the documentary hypothesis still dominates Old Testament scholarship as its official orthodoxy, the cutting edge research of recent years has typically been highly critical of the theory.³

In 1991 I published *Rethinking Genesis*,⁴ which was one of a number of books published within about a decade to challenge the documentary hypothesis and suggest a new approach to the background of Genesis. Notwithstanding the fact that this work and several major challenges to the hypothesis from established critical scholars received some significant attention—but virtually no rebuttals speaking in favor of the documentary hypothesis—J, E, D, and P continue to be paraded before university students as the original documents behind the Pentateuch.

Evangelical readers should not be sanguine about this fact. Despite the assurances of some quasi-confessional scholars that it really does not matter where Gen-

esis comes from, the documentary hypothesis is fundamentally incompatible with belief in even a minimal historical core of the Pentateuch. If the hypothesis is true, then the Pentateuch is essentially fiction. Worse than that, it is a confused, self-contradictory fiction with no unified theological message. It is with this in mind that I return to this topic and seek to make readers of this journal aware of the basic issues.

The Background of the Documentary Hypothesis

The documentary hypothesis began with the speculations of Jean Astruc (1684–1766), who suggested that he could uncover the sources of the Pentateuch by using the divine names Yahweh (“the LORD”) and *Elohim* (“God”) as a guide. He placed passages that use the name *Elohim* in one column (A), those that use Yahweh in another (B), and passages with “repetitions” in a third column (C), and interpolations in a fourth column (D). His suggestion led scholars to believe that the distinction in the divine names—that is, whether a given text calls the Deity “Yahweh” or *Elohim*—was the primary marker of the origin of that text. Using this basic criterion, scholars accounted for the development of the Pentateuch as it exists today in various ways. Some suggested a “fragmentary hypothesis” (which asserts that the Pentateuch was compiled from a mass of fragmentary sources) while others postulated a “supplemental hypothesis” (which asserts that a single document lies at the core of the Pentateuch, but that many fragmentary sources have been added to it). But the triumphant theory of Pentateuchal origins was the documentary hypothesis, often called the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis

after K. H. Graf and Julius Wellhausen, who gave it its classic expression.⁵ In the English-speaking world, the theory was popularized especially by S. R. Driver.

The Documentary Hypothesis Briefly Described

The theory asserts that behind the Pentateuch are four source documents, called J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly Code).

J, the oldest, begins at Genesis 2:4b and includes large portions of Genesis as well as portions of Exodus and Numbers and a few short texts in Deuteronomy. It is often dated to the early monarchy period and is thought to have its provenance in Judah. In Genesis, J refers to God as Yahweh for, according to the hypothesis, J believed that people began using the name Yahweh early in the antediluvian period (Gen 4:26, a J text). As a theological statement, J is often regarded as the work of a great, original thinker who gave shape to the Old Testament idea of the history of salvation.

E is somewhat later than J but follows the same basic story line as J. Genesis 15 is the first extant E text. E comes from the northern kingdom. In Genesis, E refers to God as *Elohim* rather than Yahweh because, according to E, the name Yahweh was not revealed until the exodus period (Exod 3:15, an E text). E is more sensitive to moral issues than J but it views God as somewhat more distant from man. J and E were subsequently redacted into a single document by R^{JE} (R = “redactor”). In the redaction, much of the E material was edited out and thus lost to posterity.

D was written at the time of Josiah’s reformation and is essentially the book of Deuteronomy. According to 2 Kings 22, Hilkiah the priest found a copy of the law

of Moses when the temple was being restored. In the documentary hypothesis, however, Deuteronomy was actually written at this time as a kind of pious fraud to justify Josiah's reformation. D does not have a characteristic divine name but uses both Yahweh and *Elohim*. The redactor R^p subsequently combined the texts JE and D.

P was written in the postexilic period. It begins at Genesis 1:1 and includes large portions of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers and all of Leviticus. It is said to represent the triumph of the postexilic priesthood and it attempts to justify their form of worship and codify their religion. In Genesis, P refers to God as *Elohim* since, like E, it assumes that the divine name Yahweh was first revealed at the exodus (Exod 6:3, a P text). It is dominated by genealogies, priestly regulations, and a very formal manner of narration. P was soon redacted into JED by R^p. The Pentateuch was thus formed.⁶

Defining Principles of the Documentary Hypothesis

One must recognize that according to this theory the four documents were each composed first of all as *independent, continuous, single narrations* and only later were brought together and edited into the present work. The scholars who developed the documentary hypothesis either explicitly or implicitly followed a number of basic principles in their research.

It is easy to determine the purposes and methods behind the documents and redactions. The early framers of the documentary hypothesis thought they could deduce the purposes and methods of the redactors, despite the fact that enormous cultural differences existed between the (mostly German) scholars who studied Genesis

and the ancient Near Eastern world of the text itself. In addition, scholars were willing to tolerate a glaring inconsistency in their approach to the problem. They assumed that each *document writer* (such as J) aimed to produce a single, continuous history but would tolerate no inconsistency, repetition, or narrative digressions. They believed that the *redactors*, however, were oblivious to contradiction and repetition when they combined the documents.

Stylistic differences enable scholars to distinguish one source text from another. Early advocates of the documentary hypothesis felt they could easily separate one text from another on the basis of style. P, for example, is said to have a formal, segmented, and rather aloof style while J is supposed to have written in a flowing and dramatic narrative style. This perception is reinforced by the fact that formal texts (such as Genesis 1, descriptions of the tabernacle and its offerings, and genealogies) are routinely assigned to P while texts such as Genesis 2—4 are for the most part assigned to J. But this is more a matter of content than of style. The whole Pentateuch is in standard (albeit somewhat lofty) biblical Hebrew.

Ancient editors (redactors) simply conflated their source documents without attempting to correct obvious contradictions or smooth out problems created by joining the documents together. That is, the redactors simply merged the texts at hand by the "scissors-and-paste" method of cutting up each document and then joining the whole into a continuous narrative. This is, of course, a questionable and peculiar assumption.

Israelite history and religion developed in a simple, evolutionary manner. In the documentary hypothesis, Israelite religion is

supposed to have moved from a primitive tribal religion to the advanced monotheism of postexilic Israel. Israelite social institutions that reflect a sophisticated, monotheistic religion with a central priesthood (such as the institutions of the Aaronic priesthood and the regulated systems of offerings described in Exodus and Leviticus) are said to be retrojections from the postexilic period onto the (largely mythical) era of Moses and the Exodus. Wellhausen built his theory on an evolutionary philosophy with its roots in the idealism of G. W. F. Hegel. In Wellhausen, Old Testament scholarship is dominated by an outdated and discarded approach to historical analysis.

The Arguments for the Documentary Hypothesis

As scholars have continued to study the texts, they have proposed many modifications to the original documentary hypothesis. Some scholars have made the theory more complex by dividing the four sources into even smaller sources (e.g., J¹ and J²), whereas others reduced the number of sources, especially by rejecting the existence of E altogether. Nevertheless, the basic documentary hypothesis from which all refinements come is the simplest point at which the theory can be analyzed. In addition, the book of Genesis is the true focus of the debate. The central arguments for the hypothesis are as follows.

Some texts in Genesis refer to God as Yahweh, whereas others call him Elohim. Passages in Genesis that call God Yahweh are assigned to J, who thought the name Yahweh was revealed to humanity well before the patriarchal age began. Those texts that refer to God as *Elohim* may be assigned to E or P, both of whom thought

the name Yahweh was not revealed until the Exodus.

Genesis contains some duplicate stories and repetitions. This is because each source document often contained its own version of a single tradition. Thus 12:10–20 (J) and 20:1–18 (E) contain variants of a single tradition of a patriarch passing off his wife as his sister.⁷ Sometimes the two variant versions were redacted into a single narrative, yet the documents behind the single redaction are still apparent. J and P each had a version of the Flood story, for example, but these have been combined in the present text.

Contradictions within Genesis indicate the existence of the separate documents. The implication is that one document had one version of a tradition, but a second document had another version of the same story that contradicted the first in some details.

The language and style of the documents vary. J is said to have been a masterful storyteller, but P is regarded as formal and wordy. Each document also has its own preferred vocabulary.

Each document, when extracted from the present text of the Pentateuch, shows itself to have been originally a continuous, theologically meaningful piece of literature. Some have argued that it is possible to see a specific literary and theological purpose behind each document.⁸ If this argument is established, then it obviously suggests that there actually were separate documents behind the present text.

Even on a superficial reading, some texts obviously involve more than one source. The best example is Genesis 1–2. Genesis 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2:4ff. seem to differ in many details in regard to the sequence of creation (for example, whether the animals were made before or after the cre-

ation of the first man).

The confused history of the Israelite priesthood found in the Pentateuch is best explained by the documentary hypothesis. In some texts (e.g., Deuteronomy), all Levites are priests. In other texts (the P portions of Exodus and Leviticus), only the Aaronites are priests and the rest of the Levites are mere temple workers without priestly privileges. The Pentateuch, therefore, cannot be a unified work from a single hand. Rather, documents D and P come from different perspectives and different ages.

An Analysis of the Arguments for the Documentary Hypothesis

The Names of God

The criterion of the divine names for source analysis is very weak. First, the criterion cannot be applied consistently. At the beginning of the Pentateuch we read not simply “Yahweh” in the J source (Genesis 2-4) but the unusual Yahweh *Elohim* (“the LORD God”). Genesis 22:11, an E text, uses the name *Yahweh*. M. H. Segal notes that the divine names are often used interchangeably in texts that cannot have different sources, which begs the question of why Genesis should be treated exceptionally.⁹

Second, use of the divine names as a source criterion is contrary to all ancient Near Eastern analogies. No Egyptologist, for example, would use divine names for source criticism in an Egyptian text.

Third, the rationale for the avoidance of Yahweh in E and P sources in Genesis is specious. There is no reason that J should ever avoid *Elohim*; no one suggests that he did not know the word or had theological reasons to exclude it from his texts. And even if the E and P writers thought that the Israelites did not know of the divine name Yahweh until the time

of Moses, there is no reason for them to avoid using the name in patriarchal stories except when they were directly quoting a character whom they believed did not yet know the name.¹⁰ If anything, we might have expected P to use Yahweh in his patriarchal narrative in order to establish continuity with the God of the Exodus.

Fourth, the interchange of Yahweh and *Elohim* can be explained without resort to postulating different sources. Umberto Cassuto makes the point that the two names bring out different aspects of the character of God. Yahweh is the covenant name of God, which emphasizes his special relationship to Israel. *Elohim* speaks of God universally as God of all earth.¹¹ *Elohim* is what God is and Yahweh is who he is. More precisely, one can say that the terms Yahweh and *Elohim* have semantic overlap. In a context that emphasizes God as universal deity (e.g., Genesis 1), *Elohim* is used. In a text that speaks more of God as covenant savior (Exodus 6), Yahweh is more likely to be found. Otherwise, if neither aspect is particularly stressed, the names may be alternated for variety or for no perceivable reason.

Fifth, the assumption that the J text thought the patriarchs knew the name Yahweh but that E and P texts claim they did not is based on faulty exegesis. Genesis 4:26, “Then people began to call on the name of Yahweh,” is often taken as an assertion by J that the name Yahweh was revealed at this moment in history. E and P, on the other hand, are said to have believed that the name Yahweh was first revealed in the period of the Exodus. The relevant texts are Exodus 3:13–15 (E) and Exodus 6:24 (P).

Genesis 4:26 has nothing to do with the question of when the name Yahweh was

revealed. Even Claus Westermann, an adherent of the documentary hypothesis, says that it has been misunderstood. Genesis 4:26 gives an optimistic closure to the sad history of Genesis 3-4 and says that the God his readers know as Yahweh is the one true God whom people have worshiped from earliest times.

In Exodus 3:1-15, Moses asks God his name, and is told first that God is the "I am," and then that he should tell the Israelites that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, had sent Moses to them. God adds that Yahweh is the name by which he is to be worshiped forever. The text does not say that no one had ever heard the name Yahweh before this time. Were that the case, one would find something like, "No longer will you call me the God of your fathers; from now on my name is Yahweh," similar to Genesis 17:5, 15. Instead, the text asserts that the name Yahweh will have new significance because of the Exodus. The people will now see that Yahweh is present with them.¹²

Exodus 6:2c-3 appears to be a straightforward assertion that the patriarchs did not know the name *Yahweh*. Most translations are similar to the following: "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them." But the Hebrew, as Francis I. Andersen points out, contains a case of noncontiguous parallelism that translators have not recognized: "I am Yahweh . . . and my name is Yahweh". The negative ("not") is part of a rhetorical question and not a simple negative.¹³ The whole text is set in a poetic, parallel structure, as follows:

A I am Yahweh.

- B And I made myself known to
Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob
as *El Shaddai*.
A' And my name is Yahweh;
B' Did I not make myself known to
them?

The text insists that God revealed himself to the patriarchs. It does not say that they had never heard of Yahweh or that they only knew of *El Shaddai*, although it does say that God showed them the meaning of his name *El Shaddai*. Andersen's comments are to the point: "There is no hint in Exodus that Yahweh was a new name revealed first to Moses. On the contrary, the success of his mission depended on the use of the familiar name for validation by the Israelites."¹⁴

In short, the criterion of divine names, the historical and evidential starting point for the documentary hypothesis, is completely specious. It is based on misinterpretation, mistranslation, and lack of attention to extrabiblical sources.

Repetition, Parallel Accounts (Doublets), and Redundancy

The use of repetition as evidence for multiple documents in Genesis is perhaps the most persuasive argument for the modern student, while in fact it is the most misleading of all. It seems to the modern reader that Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18 must be variants of a single tradition. How else could one explain the presence of two stories that seem so remarkably similar—a patriarch who seeks to avoid trouble by claiming that his wife is his sister? The variants (Pharaoh's house in Genesis 12, Abimelech's house in Genesis 20) appear to be examples of how a single tradition has been handed down in different forms in different com-

munities. But this assumption is an entirely modern reading of the text and ignores ancient principles of rhetoric. In an ancient text, there is no stronger indication that only a single document is present than parallel accounts. Doublets, that is, two separate stories that closely parallel one another, are the very stuff of ancient narrative. They are what the discriminating listener sought in a story.

Simple repetition is common in ancient Near Eastern literature. In the Ugaritic Epic of Keret, for example, large portions of the text are repeated verbatim (albeit from different perspectives). This technique is employed in the Bible as well. In Genesis 24, a great deal of vv. 12–27 is repeated in vv. 34–48, although in the latter text it is from the servant’s perspective.

In an analogous manner, if two or more separate events were perceived to be similar to one another, ancient writers tended to give accounts of the events in parallel fashion. To do this, they would highlight similarities in the episodes. A narrator might put into the same form all the accounts that he wants to present as parallel; he would also select material that fit the parallel he seeks to establish and perhaps leave out some of the differences. For this reason the author of Kings, in summarizing the reigns of each king of Israel and Judah, tends to employ a number of formulas. He gives the date a king came into power, the length of his reign, an evaluation, a reference indicating where the reader can find more information, and a statement of the king’s death and burial. By employing this technique, he establishes the same pattern for every king and emphasizes the evil done by Israel’s kings through the frequent repetition of “and he did evil in the sight of the Lord.” A modern writer, even one with the same theo-

logical point to make, would not employ this technique.

The parallels between Genesis 12:10–20 and 20:1–18, when analyzed by ancient literary standards, strongly indicate that the two accounts are from the same source. That is, when judged according to the narrative techniques of an ancient storyteller, the repetition is evidence that we have a single author giving us parallel but distinct episodes in his story.

In contrast to the phenomenon of doublets, redundancy within a single text occurs when, according to the documentary hypothesis, a redactor combines (for example) a J version and a P version of a tradition into a single narrative. The flood narrative is the classic example of two accounts having been joined in a scissors-and-paste method. As evidence for the conflation, advocates of the hypothesis cite the redundancies and argue that a single author would not have repeated himself so much. Thus, for example, Genesis 6:9–22 is said to be P but 7:1–5 is J. As the text reads, however, the two passages have repetition but are not fully redundant; they are consecutive. The P material is prior to the building of the ark and the J material is a speech of God after its completion but just prior to the beginning of the flood. The repetition heightens the dramatic anticipation of the deluge to follow and is not indicative of two separate documents having been combined.

Similarly, Genesis 7:21–22 is cited as a redundancy in the flood story. The documentary hypothesis assigns verse 21 to P and verse 22 to J,¹⁵ but Andersen has shown that the two verses are chiastic and are not the product of two separate writers.¹⁶

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| A | They perished |
| B | Every living thing that moves on |

earth . . .

B' Everything that has the breath of
the living spirit . . .

A' They died

Andersen argues that when the text is left as it stands rather than arbitrarily divided into sources and doublets, the artistic unity of the whole gives the impression of having been formed as a single, unified narration.¹⁷

Contradictions in the Text

Apparent contradictions in Genesis are often cited as markers to the different documents behind the text. A simple example in the flood account concerns the number of animals to be brought on board the ark (6:20 says to bring one pair of every kind of animal, but 7:2 says to bring seven pairs of clean animals). The explanation is simply that 7:1–2 is a precise figure given immediately before the flood but that 6:20 is a general figure given before the ark was built. Provision had to be made to ensure that there would be sufficient livestock after the flood, and thus the higher number of clean animals. Of course, contradictions have to be examined on a case-by-case basis, but apparent contradictions hardly sustain the documentary hypothesis.

The Criterion of Style

As already indicated, the idea that J and P have different styles is a result of artificially dividing the text. The “arid” style of the genealogies of P is simply a by-product of the fact that they are genealogies—it has nothing to do with their being written in a different style. Whybray points out that the genealogies ascribed to J “have precisely the same ‘arid’ character as those attributed to P.”¹⁸

Studies in the Pentateuch written in the early twentieth century from the perspective of the documentary hypothesis tended to contain lengthy lists of what was supposed to be the characteristic vocabulary of each document. One rarely sees in modern studies lists of this kind.¹⁹ The criterion is itself quite artificial; we know nothing of the common speech of the people of ancient Israel, and we cannot be sure that the words cited as synonymous pairs are really synonymous. One word may have been chosen over another for the sake of a special nuance in a given circumstance, or indeed simply for the sake of variety.

The Unity of Each Document

The argument that each document (J, E, or P) is a self-contained and complete narrative when separated from its context in Genesis is simply absurd, although demonstrating the absurdity of it will require us to examine a text in some detail. For example, if one looks at Genesis 28:10–30:7 as it is analyzed in a standard text (Driver’s *Introduction*), the internal confusion of each document is self-evident. Below is the text as separated into its J and E components along with additional, extraneous material.²⁰

J Text

^{28:10} So Jacob departed from Beersheba and headed toward Haran. ^{28:13} And there was Yahweh who stood above it and said, “I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; I will give the land on which you lie to you and to your descendants. ^{28:14} Also, your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out toward the west and toward the east and toward the north and toward the south; and all the families of

the earth will be blessed in you and in your descendants. ^{28:15} And look, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ^{28:16} Then Jacob woke up from his sleep and said, “Yahweh is definitely in this place, but I did not know it.” ^{28:19} He called that place Bethel although the city used to be called Luz. ^{29:2} And he looked and saw a well in the field, and there were three flocks of sheep lying there beside it, for they watered the flocks from that well. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. ^{29:3} When all the flocks were gathered there, they would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and then put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well. ^{29:4} So Jacob said to them, “My brothers, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” ^{29:5} Then he said to them, “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” And they said, “We do know him.” ^{29:6} So he said to them, “Is all well with him?” And they said, “All is well; look, there is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep.” ^{29:7} Then he said, “You know, it is still the middle of the day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep and go pasture them.” ^{29:8} But they said, “We cannot until all the flocks are gathered and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.” ^{29:9} While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep (for she was a shepherdess). ^{29:10} And this is what happened: when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his

mother’s brother. ^{29:11} Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. ^{29:12} Then Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah’s son. She ran and told her father. ^{29:13} Then this happened: when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he told Laban about all these things. ^{29:14} And Laban said to him, “For sure you are my bone and my flesh.” And he stayed with him a month. ^{29:31} Now Yahweh saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren. ^{29:32} And Leah became pregnant and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, “Because Yahweh has seen my affliction; certainly my husband will love me now.” ^{29:33} Then she became pregnant again and bore a son and said, “Because Yahweh has heard that I am unloved, he has given me this son, too.” So she named him Simeon. ^{29:34} And she became pregnant again and bore a son and said, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi. ^{29:35} And she became pregnant again and bore a son and said, “This time I will praise Yahweh.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. ^{30:3b} “I too may have children by her.” ^{30:4} So she gave him her slave girl Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. ^{30:5} And Bilhah became pregnant and bore Jacob a son. ^{30:7} And Bilhah Rachel’s slave girl became pregnant again, and bore Jacob a second son.

E Text

^{28:11} Then he came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the

place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ^{28:12} And he had a dream, and it was like this: a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were actually ascending and descending on it. ^{28:17} So he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God (Bethel)! This is the gate of heaven!" ^{28:18} So Jacob got up early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and he poured oil on its top. ^{28:20} Then Jacob made a vow: "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I am making, and if he will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ^{28:21} and if I return safely to my father's house, then Yahweh will be my God. ^{28:22} "And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and I will indeed give a tenth to you of all that you give me." ^{29:1} Then Jacob went along on his journey and came to the land of the easterners. ^{29:15} Then Laban said to Jacob, "Since you are my relative, should you for that reason serve me for nothing? Tell me, what will your wages be?" ^{29:16} Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ^{29:17} And Leah's eyes were tender, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. ^{29:18} But Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ^{29:19} So Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man; stay with me." ^{29:20} So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days on account of his love for her. ^{29:21} Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my time is completed, so that I may go in to her." ^{29:22} And Laban got together all the men of the

place and made a feast. ^{29:23} But this is what happened: in the night he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him and Jacob went in to her. ^{29:25} So the morning came and there was Leah! So he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Didn't I serve you for Rachel? Why then have you cheated me?" ^{29:26} But Laban said, "It is not the tradition here in our place to marry off the younger before the first-born. ^{29:27} "Fulfill the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for your service—you will serve with me for another seven years." ^{29:28} So Jacob did that and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ^{29:30} So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel in fact more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years. ^{30:1} But when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I will die!" ^{30:2} Then Jacob got angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld the fruit of the womb from you?" ^{30:3a} So she said, "Here is my slave girl Bilhah! Go in to her so that she may bear on my knees!" ^{30:6} And Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice, and has given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan."

Later editorial additions

^{29:24} Laban also gave his slave girl Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a slave girl.

^{29:29} Laban also gave his slave girl Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her slave girl.

Read by itself, the J version makes no sense at all. It indicates that Jacob had a vision of Yahweh when he arrived at Haran and that he built a shrine there (note the jump from 28:19 to 29:2, which

implies he is in Haran). In 28:19 he calls the place Bethel, but a reader who had only J would be confused about whether this is the Bethel in Canaan or if Jacob was naming some site at Haran “Bethel.” The story then leaps without any transition at all from Jacob’s dream to his encounter with the shepherds and with Laban’s family. Then it abruptly tells us that Leah gave birth to four children but was distressed because Jacob did not love her. Bear in mind that the reader of J *has no idea who Leah is*, much less that she is Jacob’s unloved wife, because this is the first time she appears in J. In 30:3b somebody (identity not given) says she wants to have children by “her,” and only in the next verse does the reader learn that the surrogate mother is Bilhah, who is also otherwise unknown to the reader. But for whom is Bilhah acting as a surrogate mother—for Leah? Only in 30:7 is the reader told in passing that Bilhah is Rachel’s slave. But of course, up until this moment the only thing the reader knows about Rachel is that she is the daughter of Laban whom Jacob met at the well. How is the reader to know that Rachel is his second wife?

E, by contrast, tells us that Jacob had a dream of a stairway to heaven at Bethel, but in this version Jacob receives no covenantal promise. Jacob simply deduces that the deity he saw in the dream was Yahweh. He makes a vow to Yahweh despite the fact that Yahweh (in E’s version) has not given him any covenantal promise that would give Jacob the right to consider Yahweh bound by an oath to him (note also the divine name “Yahweh” in 28:21, an E text). He then goes to the land of the easterners where Laban enters the narrative abruptly and without introduction. After the story of the marriages of Jacob, we are suddenly told that Rachel

was jealous of Leah. This is strange since in E’s version the reader does not know anything about Leah having children; all he or she knows is that Rachel was beloved and Leah unloved! Also, the reader can infer from what she says that Rachel has been unable to bear children (it is actually J who tells the reader that Rachel was infertile). But in 30:6 Rachel is suddenly praising God for giving her a son and she names him Dan. But from where did Dan come? Who is Dan’s mother, Rachel or Bilhah? The reader who only has E cannot tell. One should recall that even though E was supposed to have been written after J, it is altogether independent of J. The early readers of E would know nothing of J.

Of course, a standard response is that details that would make the J and E versions more coherent have been suppressed in the redactional process. Such a response, however, only concedes the point that we are making: J and E, as we have them, are incoherent. One cannot claim that the coherence of J and E establish the validity of the documentary hypothesis.

Also, one can hardly claim that the supposed theological vision of each document supports the documentary hypothesis. The assertion is based on the assumption that the hypothesis is true; it is not an independent argument for the theory. Scholars once routinely spoke of the “theology of J” or of “P.” One has the sense that, even among scholars trained in the documentary hypothesis, an increasing number have difficulty taking seriously analyses like those by Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff (see note 8) as presentations of the theological background of Genesis. Thomas L. Thompson notes that, in more recent

analysis, the Elohist has disappeared from view entirely and the Yahwist is fast fading from existence, even as P grows larger and larger. The hypothesis has no value as a guide for continued research.²¹ Whybray, too, in outlining especially the recent contributions by Rolf Rendtorff²² and H. H. Schmid, demonstrates that the notion of a “theology of the Yahwist” is vanishing among scholars.²³

The Hypothesis Proven by Some Specific Texts

Many scholars recognize that the arguments as such for the documentary hypothesis have been exploded, but they appear to hold to the hypothesis because a few key passages seem persuasive. In particular, Genesis 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2:4ff. appear to come from separate sources. They lack both logic and a sense of balance. If the arguments for the hypothesis are shown to be worthless, then the differences in Genesis 1–3 must be explained in some other way. The mere presence of problems in the early Genesis narrative is not sufficient to establish the documentary hypothesis.²⁴

The Hypothesis Verified by the History of the Priesthood

It appears that many scholars continue to support the hypothesis because of questions regarding the history of Israel. In particular, the hypothesis seems to offer the best explanation of why the term *Levite* is used inconsistently in the Old Testament. But the solution to the problem of the history of the priesthood is best explained within the context of the history of Israel as it is traditionally and canonically understood.²⁵ The documentary hypothesis only exacerbates the problem with its competing theologies from

rival groups vying for priestly power.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The documentary hypothesis is a zombie; it is dead but still roaming the halls of Old Testament scholarship seeking its next victim. What can account for this? The only answer can be that no paradigm has arisen to replace the documentary hypothesis as an explanation for the problem of the origin of the Pentateuch. Thus, professors of Old Testament persist in teaching it, even though a large number, one suspects, know that it is not true. Sadly, when confronted with the documentary hypothesis, many students and lay readers are dazzled by the apparent sophistication of the scholarship, and are especially captivated by the fact that “J” seems much more interesting than stodgy old Genesis with all its genealogies.

Many believing Christians may rise to assert that the ruling paradigm should be that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. This is true but inadequate, at least in the case of Genesis. It is inadequate because Moses lived hundreds of years after all the characters of Genesis had died. One could suggest that he received all his knowledge of the history of the patriarchs directly from God, but we do not make this claim about any other historical book. To the contrary, we assert that the writers of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Luke, and every other historical book in the Bible used sources where the author himself was not a witness to the events.

In *Rethinking Genesis*, I suggest that there are sources behind Genesis but that these sources are compatible with the idea of Mosaic authorship. In addition, I suggest that these sources had real ancient Near Eastern analogues (unlike J, E, D, and P, which are completely without par-

allel). Finally, I argue that these sources can be said to have had a real significance for Israel in Egypt and that the collection of these sources into the present book of Genesis during the exodus is the most satisfactory explanation for the writing of the book. I will leave it to the reader to decide whether *Rethinking Genesis* makes for a persuasive solution to the problem. But we can only hope that some paradigm that is not opposed to Scripture will finally put the documentary hypothesis in the grave once and for all.

ENDNOTES

¹Thus Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Hidden Book in the Bible / Restored, Translated, and Introduced* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998).

²A few of the major works are S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (1897; reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1972); John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2d ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1930); Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter Ackroyd (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968); J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); George W. Coats, *Genesis: with an Introduction to Narrative Literature, Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Claus

Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg / Fortress, 1984); Werner H. Schmidt, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: SCM, 1984).

³R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); Rolf Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 147 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977); Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 119ff.; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987) xxxiv-xxxv.

⁴Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991; reprint, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000).

⁵For a history of Old Testament criticism, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 3-82. See also R. J. Thompson, *Moses and the Law in a Century of Criticism Since Graf* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); also Fohrer, 23-32, 106-113; and Soggin, 79-98.

⁶A few fragments not related to any of the four source documents (e.g., Genesis 14) are also to be found in the Pentateuch. See also the summary in Whybray, 20-21. For a detailed presentation of the classic form of the hypothesis, see Driver, 1-159. For a presentation of the hypothesis in a more complex, evolved form, see Fohrer, 120-195. For a survey of the hypothesis in the context of some more recent developments, see Soggin, 99-160, and Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, xxv-xlv.

⁷See Speiser, 150-152.

⁸Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975).

⁹M. H. Segal, *The Pentateuch: Its Composition and Authorship* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 11-14.

¹⁰Whybray, 64-65.

¹¹Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1941) 15-41.

¹²Cf. John Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987) 39-41.

¹³Francis I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) 102.

¹⁴Andersen, 102.

¹⁵Speiser, 49; Skinner, 153, 165.

¹⁶Andersen, 39-40.

¹⁷Andersen, 40.

¹⁸Whybray, 60.

¹⁹See Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, trans. John Scullion, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary Series 89 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 146-150.

²⁰Driver, 16.

²¹Thompson, 49.

²²Rendtorff, *Problem*, 119-136.

²³Whybray, 93-108. He especially summarizes arguments developed in Rendtorff, *Pentateuch*, and H. H. Schmid, *Der sogenannte Jahwist* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976).

²⁴For a more complete analysis of this problem, see my *Rethinking Genesis*, chapter 10 (pp. 185-197 in the Christian Focus edition).

²⁵For a more complete analysis of this problem, see my *Rethinking Genesis*, chapter 11 (pp. 198-234 in the Christian Focus edition).